

A “McCarthyite Backlash” Against Pro-Palestine Speech

From university disciplinary hearings to death threats, supporters of Palestinian rights are facing a wave of reprisals.

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In Rochester, New York, a religious center received enough threats around an in-person event about Palestine that the program had to be moved online. In Arlington, Virginia, bomb threats [forced](#) the country’s largest American Muslim civil rights group to move a banquet partially focused on Gaza to an undisclosed location. In Houston, a hotel [pulled out](#) of hosting a conference organized by a prominent Palestinian rights group due to “escalating security concerns.” In Brooklyn, a right-wing City Councilperson [brought](#) a gun to a student protest for Gaza. And in Washington, DC, a United States senator [called](#) for a Justice Department investigation into student supporters of Palestine.

As Israel’s bombardment of Gaza continues, Americans are expressing their opposition on college campuses, on social media, and in the streets. But the dissent has come with a cost. Across the US, supporters of Palestinian rights are facing a severe and unprecedented backlash to their speech and activism, ranging from university [condemnations](#) of student protest to [death threats](#) and intimidation from pro-Israel groups.

“We’ve had an exponential surge in requests for legal help. It has been like nothing we’ve seen before,” said Radhika Sainath, a senior staff attorney at Palestine Legal, which defends the free speech rights of Palestine advocates.

Since October 8th, the group has [responded](#) to nearly 200 reports of “suppression of Palestinian rights advocacy”—almost as many incidents as they addressed in [all of last year](#). According to Sainath, attorneys have spoken to everyone from “people being fired from their jobs for tweets or social media messages that support Palestinian human rights” to

student critics of Israel who are being “doxxed and put on a website called ‘College Terror List,’” which seeks to make them unemployable.

“There is an increase in people who are really concerned with the genocidal intentions of Israel right now—and they’re being met with immense McCarthyite backlash and suppression,” Sainath said.

Colleges and universities are the epicenter of this renewed Palestine solidarity activism, and have quickly become prime sites of the reprisals against it. For years, Israel-advocacy groups have worked to police public discourse on campuses, where pro-Palestinian sentiment is more visible than in perhaps any other forum of American life. Supporters of Israel have urged institutions to [cancel](#) pro-Palestine events, created [blacklists](#) of students deemed “antisemitic” for their Palestine activism, filed civil rights [complaints against](#) universities for allowing such activism, and [pressed](#) universities to fire professors who criticize Israel. And since October 7th—when Hamas attacked Israel, and Israel began bombing Gaza—a new wave of activism has garnered fresh backlash.

Last week, student groups at [Yale](#), [Dartmouth](#), and [Princeton](#), among others, posted statements of solidarity with Palestine, arguing that the present violence in Israel/Palestine has its roots in Israel’s oppression of Palestinians; many specifically cited Israel’s ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948 and the 16-year blockade of the Gaza Strip as catalysts for recent events. On October 8th, in a statement co-signed by 34 other student groups, Harvard’s Palestine Solidarity Committee [said](#) that they “hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.” The next day, Yale’s pro-Palestinian student group, Yalies4Palestine, released a statement that [read](#): “We mourn the tragic loss of civilian lives, and for this we hold the Zionist regime accountable.”



Joint Statement by Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups on the Situation in Palestine:

We, the undersigned student organizations, hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.

Today's events did not occur in a vacuum. For the last two decades, **millions of Palestinians in Gaza have been forced to live in an open-air prison.**

Israeli officials promise to “open the gates of hell,” and the massacres in Gaza have already commenced. Palestinians in Gaza have no shelters for refuge and nowhere to escape. In the coming days, Palestinians will be forced to bear the full brunt of Israel's violence.



tinyurl.com/cct2023palestine

[Screenshot of the Joint Statement by Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups](#)

The backlash to these efforts has been swift and resounding. Two days after the Harvard students released their statement, for instance, more than 350 Harvard faculty [signed a letter](#) saying that the activists' stance amounted to “nothing less than condoning the mass murder” of Israelis. Several US lawmakers [issued](#) similar denunciations. And the opposition did not stop there. On October 12th, the right-wing group Accuracy in Media [dispatched](#) a truck to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to publicize images of students who were thought to be part of signatory organizations. The truck was emblazoned with the URL “HarvardHatesJews.com,” which redirected to the Accuracy in Media site. According to a former American Civil Liberties Union president who [spoke to the New York Times](#), such actions aim to suppress students' speech. They may also be impacting their employment prospects: After the Harvard students' letter was published, CEOs at [multiple companies](#) publicly demanded that the university release the names of students whose groups had signed the statement so that they could be sure not to hire them. And the prominent law firm Davis Polk [rescinded](#) three job offers it had made to students suspected of signing the Harvard statement and a similar statement at Columbia University. (After two of the students said they had not been involved in their groups' decisions to sign, the firm said it

would reconsider.)

Such job offer revocations are sometimes accompanied by further harassment, as in the case of New York University Law School's student body president Ryna Workman. On October 10th, Workman sent a newsletter to the law school's student body expressing solidarity with Palestinians and blaming the "tremendous loss of life" in the region on Israel's apartheid regime. In a statement sent to journalists, Workman said their message was "inspired [by] what many [Jewish peace activists](#) and Israelis, including the [editorial board of Israel's largest newspaper](#), have voiced over the past week in response to the violence." However, in response to their newsletter, Workman lost a job offer at the law firm Winston & Strawn. The law school's Student Bar Association also voted to begin the process of ousting Workman as student body president, and NYU law alumni have since called for their expulsion from the university. "I've been getting death threats online," Workman said in the statement, adding that they have been attacked for being Black, queer, and nonbinary. "The harassment campaign against me has targeted all facets of my identity."

Students say that educational institutions have not done enough to protect them from such harassment. For instance, at an October 12th pro-Israel gathering at Columbia University, a self-described Columbia administrative employee [told](#) student reporters that he wished students at the Palestine rally would "die." Pro-Palestine student activists at Columbia told *Jewish Currents* that the incident was only one example of the harassment they had faced. "Students on campus have been taunted in the dining hall, hijabs have been ripped off, students have been spat on, just for things like wearing a keffiyeh," one member of the Columbia chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), who wished to remain anonymous due to fear of retaliation, said in an interview. Students said the Columbia administration's response had fallen short. On October 18th, the university's president sent a message to Columbia staff and students lamenting those who "are using this moment to spread antisemitism, Islamophobia, bigotry against Palestinians and Israelis, and various other forms of hate," and referenced "that some of this abhorrent rhetoric is coming from members of our community, including members of our faculty and staff," but the message did not specifically address the threat to pro-Palestine ralliers or other incidents of harassment on campus. (In response to questions from *Jewish Currents*, a Columbia spokesperson said "the safety of our campus community is our primary and ongoing concern.")

Some institutions have themselves cracked down on students' political expression. A high school student in Frankfort, Illinois, who requested anonymity because they are applying to universities, said that on October 13th, school officials told a group of Palestinian students to stop wearing keffiyehs—scarves that are a Palestinian national symbol.

Such policing of expression is sometimes backed up by disciplinary actions. Maddy Ward, a student at Rockland Community College at the State University of New York, told *Jewish Currents* that when she interrupted a "unity gathering for Israel" by walking in and shouting, "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" and "Jews for Palestine," campus police officers told her that she would be subject to a campus disciplinary hearing, and that her actions could also be investigated as a crime. Ward was punished in advance of the October 19th disciplinary hearing by not being permitted to register for classes or obtain a transcript, according to a letter from a school official that Ward shared with *Jewish Currents*. Palestine Legal said that this move raised concerns about due process—as did the university's denial of Ward's request to have Sainath, the Palestine Legal attorney, present via speakerphone during the hearing. "They're trying to criminalize and suppress people for speaking out,"

Ward said. In a letter to the college, Palestine Legal said the administration's actions raise "serious First Amendment and due process concerns." (A spokesperson for the university told *Jewish Currents* that "officials are investigating an incident involving an allegation of disruption at an on-campus event" and that the school "is following applicable procedures set forth in the Student Code of Conduct.")

On other campuses, the threats to Palestine activists have been even more severe, such as the October 12th rally at Brooklyn College where Inna Vernikov, a Republican New York City Councilwoman, showed up openly carrying a gun. Vernikov [filmed herself](#) calling the student ralliers "pro-Hamas" and "nothing short of terrorists without the bombs." (The councilwoman was later [arrested](#) for openly carrying a weapon at a rally, which is prohibited in New York.) One member of Brooklyn College's SJP chapter, who asked to remain anonymous due to safety concerns, said that students were alarmed by Vernikov's presence. "We felt threatened. A lot of students felt like their lives were in danger," they said. SJP leaders at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, recounted similar fears amid the barrage of death threats that followed their Instagram posts defending Palestinians' "right to resist." "We haven't been to classes in a week because we feel unsafe," said Ruya Hazeyan, a co-president of the school's SJP chapter. Hazeyan said that the university administration has temporarily exempted her from attending class, but that she hasn't received any further information from the school on what she and the other students should be doing in response to the threats.

While many of these threats have been aimed at student activists, Palestine Legal's Sainath said the climate of repression has also affected professors and university administrators. "Professors are being questioned, their classes are being canceled, and they are being locked out of their emails over supporting Palestinian rights," she said. "Some university administrators have reported to us that they feel that they can't even publicly support their Palestinian students right now." Pro-Israel donors have also put pressure on institutions themselves. Multiple donors to Harvard [said](#) they would cut off their funds because the university had been too slow to condemn the Hamas attack and the student groups' statement. Some donors to the University of Pennsylvania have also [said](#) they will no longer fund the school because of what they described as its "silence" on the Hamas attacks, though the president in fact condemned Hamas's "abhorrent attacks" three days after the assault.

While campuses are at the center of the clash over pro-Palestinian speech, human rights groups and other non-academic institutions have also been targeted by harassment campaigns. A co-leader of local solidarity group Rochester Witness Palestine, who requested anonymity due to safety concerns, told *Jewish Currents* that Ahmad Abuznaid, the executive director of the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights (USCPR), was scheduled to give an in-person keynote speech in Rochester, New York, during an October 13th event. The speech was slated to be held at an Islamic center in Rochester; however, the center had to pull out of hosting the event because of threats it received. (Abuznaid spoke online instead.) Such concerns have also affected other events in Rochester, with a Palestinian film festival organized by Witness Palestine also being moved online after the host theater pulled out for safety reasons.

The Rochester talk featuring Abuznaid was not the only USCPR event that was affected. In Texas, a Hilton hotel [canceled](#) the group's upcoming conference, saying that it posed "potential risks to our Team Members and guests." But the hotel did not cite "any specific threats or provid[e] any record of the threats received," Abuznaid said, noting that "without

any of that information, it's hard to believe they didn't simply cave to anti-Palestinian racists." Texas Governor Greg Abbott praised the hotel for canceling an event he said was put on by " Hamas supporters," adding that "no location in Texas should host or sponsor US CPR." Meanwhile, in Virginia, the Council on American Islamic Relations, the largest Muslim American civil rights group, [said](#) it had to move the location of an annual banquet because, after it updated the event programming to focus on Palestinian human rights, the hotel hosting the event received calls from anonymous people threatening "to plant bombs in the hotel's parking garage, kill specific hotel staff in their homes, and storm the hotel."

As the Israeli bombing of Gaza continues with no end in sight, Sainath said she is bracing for more such instances. "The repression we're seeing is different in nature and more intense than anything we have witnessed in recent years," she said. At the same time, Sainath predicts the crackdown on speech won't stop dissent. "People of conscience—particularly of the youngest generations—are continuing to speak out despite immense personal risk," she said.

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Featured image: This was the biggest Keffiyeh Thursday in Harvard history. Our deepest thank you's to the students, faculty, and staff that walked out of class today to protest the genocide unfolding in front of our eyes. May we never stop fighting for Palestine. May we see a free Palestine in our lifetime. May we always be surrounded by people willing to stand up for what they believe in. In solidarity always (Source: [@harvardpsc Instagram](#))

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